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Panofsky – Warburg – Cassirer. From Iconology to Image Science

Introduction

In the twenties and thirties of the 19th century until the fall of democracy in Germany in 1933, the German city Hamburg rose up to an inspiring and progressive research site by the opening of the new university in 1919. This event led to an unconventional interdisciplinary work of different researchers in different fields who were united by a common research question: How does a human being perceive and react to the world? Looking back it had been Darwin's evolution theory of man and the question in the background concerning the difference to animals which led to this further-reaching question.[1] By focusing only on three of these researchers it had been Ernst Cassirer in philosophy, Erwin Panofsky in history of art as well as the independent cultural scientist and art historian Aby M. Warburg who were examining the issue in Hamburg.[2] Remarkably, it had been artistic artefacts which played a fundamental role for all of them because they consider these works – and this is important – as direct reactions to the world: You can say they can be understood as an answer to the impressions of the world. Insofar they were dealing with cultural questions, because each work of art has according to their opinion a relevance for life.[3]

Respectively to this background originally neither the philosopher Cassirer nor the art historian Panofsky or the cultural researcher Warburg had had factual based,

1 See Hartung 2004.

2 Other researchers working on the same topic were particularly associated with Ernst Cassirer. These are, to name just a few, Cassirer's and Panofsky's doctoral student Edgar Wind, the biologist Jacob von Uexküll, the developmental psychologist Heinz Werner and his assistant the artist of the Bauhaus-University Gertrud Grunow.

3 See respectively to this topic as well Sauer 2018b.

Published in: Jacobus Bracker (Ed.), *Homo Pictor. Image Studies and Archaeology in Dialogue.* Freiburger Studien zur Archäologie & Visuellen Kultur 2. Heidelberg: Propylaeum 2020, https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.709

historical interests that became common in the nineteenth century through the loss of aesthetic knowledge confronting speculative aesthetics.[4] In conclusion that means, instead of a substantial notion and a documental concept these researchers count on a functional notion of artistic artefacts. Insofar it is of interest that notably Panofsky invented a methodological procedure the so-called iconological method which again led back to a historical analysis of artistic artefacts that is still in common use today.

Respectively to these findings and by considering the topic of the conference *Homo Pictor*, I like to show with the following, the backgrounds of the original concept of the image of Warburg and Cassirer on which Panofsky's method is based.

By doing so it shall become apparent that the original idea of the image Warburg and Cassirer pursued and which has been lost or hidden by the aftermath of National Socialism in Germany can be used as a basis of transforming Iconology to Image Science. A key factor in this regard are the consequences that can be drawn from their concept. They become transparent through taking their ideas seriously. That means if it is true that humans are responding to the world by feelings and are able to express them in images which are comprehensible for others, as Warburg and Cassirer insisted on, we are communicating not only by words but by images our opinion of the world or the subject that is represented.

Respectively to this thesis the paper is build up in three parts. First, I will present the original image concept of Warburg, Cassirer and Panofsky. Secondly, I will follow the idea of Warburg and Cassirer to consider artistic artefacts as materializations of feelings (in German: *Entäußerungen von Empfindungen*). Thirdly and at last, I will draw the consequences of their findings by opening a new field: concretely, the transformation from Iconology to Image Science respectively *Bildwissenschaft*.

Image Concepts of Warburg and Cassirer

It is fundamental for the image concept of Warburg and Cassirer that the world can be taken by humans only by feelings. The understanding of world, they pointed out, bases on them. Warburg reveals this connection already in his thesis in 1893. Much later, in 1923, many years after his journey to the United States, Warburg concluded in his famous paper about serpent-rituals of Hopi Indians that humans are dominated by passionate arousals when confronted with the world. In three steps,

4 Compare to this in addition the forthcoming publication of Sauer (forthcoming) about the lemma "Spekulative Ästhetik versus Ästhetik als Formwissenschaft (1830–1870)".

Warburg said, they will be handled by man: Initially they will be spellbound by rituals, then calmed down with images and at last distanced with abstract signs.[5]

This threefold system of Warburg already shows the closeness to Cassirer's concept to which Warburg had sent his paper directly.[6] Like Warburg, Cassirer differs in his "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms" that was published in three parts in 1923, the end of 1924 and 1929 between three steps through which man reveals the world: In accordance to this, Cassirer notes, that humans in contrast to animals have the opportunity to distance themselves from their lively experiences with the world by putting them initially as a "You" and then as an "It" in front of themselves. Lastly man recognizes oneself as an "I" in this world.[7] Transferred in a threefold system Cassirer differentiates at first between a mythical thinking, then a descriptive-linguistic and at last an abstract access to the world. In coherence with Warburg he estimates that these methods of handling world by humans depend on an innate form of perception that is ruled by experiencing and suffering (in German: *Erleben und Erleiden*). The "perception", as Cassirer points out, is dominated by these experiences. Cassirer calls it accordingly "perception of expression" (in German: *Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung*).[8]

The profound common base between Warburg and Cassirer explains as well Warburg's statement in a letter to Cassirer on April 15th, 1924. Therein he pointed out that he sees himself in a common path on establishing cultural studies as one of a human being in motion.[9]

Remarkably, Erwin Panofsky's method, the so-called Iconology, bases on a similar concept. It depends on an idea of history that Cassirer developed by concluding that documents at any time are forms of self-created sense. All items produced by man be it texts or artistic artefacts can be seen as historical documents.[10] Already in Panofsky's lecture about *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* in 1924/25 at the Warburg Institute in Hamburg it becomes obvious how important these findings of Cassirer have been for him.[11] There, Panofsky points out that a work of art can be considered as a symbolical expression of the artist's aesthetical and philosophical attitude to

5 Warburg 1923, 68–71.
6 Raulff 1988, 112–113.
7 Cassirer 1929, 79–100, see as well with regard to the function and meaning of mythical thinking Cassirer 1923, and with respect to language Cassirer 1924/25.
8 See Sauer 2008.
9 See Raio 2008, letter No. 3: "(er sich) auf einem gemeinsamen Weg sieht, eine Kulturwissenschaft vom bewegten Menschen (zu begründen)" (Translation MS).
10 Cassirer 1929, 222–237.
11 Panofsky 1927, see in addition respectively to Panofsky's former nearness to formal aesthetics Lorenz – Jaś 2008.

life.[12] Therefore, the natural goal of an art historian, Panofsky exclaims, lies in an "a posteriori" analysis, that means a subsequent analysis of artistic artefacts which are products of this attitude. Based on this idea Panofsky develops his art historical method which was published in two papers 1932 and 1939 and has been later redone twice, the first in 1964 and the second in 1955.[13]

The starting point of his method is that each work can be considered as "manifestations of principles" which Ernst Cassirer called symbolic values. They depend, as Panofsky interprets Cassirer, on peculiar emotional attitudes of people in different historical situations.[14] In accordance to these principles, Panofsky says, it is necessary to differentiate in a first step between namable and characteristic aspects. Thus, this procedure allows to differ between the item and its expression.[15] But even if it is possible to recognize already therein the connection to Cassirer as well as to Warburg, Panofsky will depart from their concept for switching the accent form the actual-sensual level to the factual-intellectual level by just listing the motives of artistic artefacts:

> The world of pure forms, which can be recognized as carriers of primary or natural meanings may be called a world of artistic motives. A listing of these motives would be a prae-iconographical description of the work of art.[16]

A famous example Panofsky is giving for labeling something in that list of motives is a man who lifts his hat. The factual or primary meaning lies in the identification of the forms of the hat as a hat, whereas the natural meaning of the hat – its expressive

12 Pochat 1983, 166.

13 Printed in Kaemmerling 1984.

14 Panofsky 1932, 212, see as well in more detail the original German text: "Doch zugleich enthüllt er (der ikonographische Typus der Anbetung Christi durch Maria) eine neue, den späteren Phasen des Mittelalters eigentümliche emotionale Einstellung. Eine wirkliche erschöpfende Interpretation der eigentlichen Bedeutung oder des Gehalts könnte sogar zeigen, dass die technischen Verfahren, die für ein bestimmtes Land, für eine bestimmte Periode oder einen bestimmten Künstler eigentümlich sind […] symptomatisch für dieselbe Grundhaltung sind, die sich in sämtlichen anderen spezifischen Merkmalen des betreffenden Stils ausmachen läßt. Indem wir so reine Formen, Motive, Bilder, Anekdoten und Allegorien als Manifestationen zugrundeliegender Prinzipien auffassen, interpretieren wir alle diese Elemente als etwas, das Ernst Cassirer 'symbolische' Werte genannt hat."

15 Panofsky 1932, 187: "zwischen Sach-Sinn und Ausdrucks-Sinn" (Translation MS).

16 Panofsky 1939, 210: "Die Welt reiner Formen, die dergestalt als Träger primärer oder natürlicher Bedeutungen erkannt werden, mag die Welt der künstlerischen Motive heißen. Eine Aufzählung dieser Motive wäre eine vorikonographische Beschreibung des Kunstwerks." (Translation MS).

meaning – lies in the psychological interpretation or "empathy"[17] with the person and its doing, be it done in that case in a friendly or hostile manner.[18] The latter, he postulates, becomes visible for us in the style of forms the items are designed in history.[19] However, although Panofsky differentiates at first between these two forms of meaning, it is remarkable that the latter has no relevance in his methodological system until now. Already in his own formulations this tendency becomes obvious when he assessed formal aspects as needless and termed only the listing of artistic motives as fundamental for the prae-iconographical method. Thus, he puts forward the next step to the so-called iconographic analysis by which the conventional sense of the motives shall be identified.[20] Respectively to the introduced example he denotes the head-covering customarily as a gesture of courtesy that is in common use in his time. Therefore, in order to identify the doing it is necessary to know the customs and habits of a time. At last he shifts the accent in describing his method to a pure historical analysis of the context of the work which he considers as the true meaning or substance (in German: *den Gehalt*) of the work. This third step is named by Panofsky iconological analysis. With the help of this third analysis the stance of a nation, an epoch, a social class, of religious or philosophical beliefs shall be cleared which have been modified by the artist and come into view by his work.[21] Thus, the hat and the doing of the man can be seen as a convention of an upper-class man who lifted it for courtesy to greet others.

In conclusion, even if Panofsky adopts with his methodological system the idea and the threefold system of man's expressions of the world as Cassirer and Warburg invented it, he departs from both nevertheless. Instead, Panofsky focuses on the interpretation of the symbolic forms which he considers as manifestations of processes of distancing from the world. At last his interpretation of the key findings of Cassirer and Warburg leads to the result that the iconological method is reduced again – just as the speculative aesthetics since the mid of 19th century ended up – in an applicable and effective historical analysis with no reference to the initial feelings of man that have been pointed out as essential by Warburg and Cassirer.[22]

However, the findings of Warburg and Cassirer that humans are responding to the world by feelings and are able to express them in images inspired not only Panofsky – although he himself found no way to describe them adequately – but as well further researchers. It is the theory and the methods of New Historicism namely

17 See with respect to the history of this term behind the background of psychological therapy Dörflinger 2018.
18 Panofsky 1939, 207–209.
19 Ibid. 223.
20 Ibid. 210–211.
21 Ibid. 211.
22 See Sauer 2018b.

of the American literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt and the German art historian Klaus Herding who have joined the idea, and assume that the emotional attitudes of people manifest in images, language and music and so the sensations of the time are mirrored in them. Greenblatt has been following this idea since the 1980s. He assumes that it is possible to reconstruct the circulating, historically shaped "social energy" in art through deconstructive methods,[23] whereas in the 1990s Herding used analytical methods to analyze man's "psychic energy" in images.[24] Although their approach builds on the same foundations as Warburg and Cassirer, their results do not differ from Panofsky's findings. This is because they analyze the "living forms" (Cassirer) of the arts as well as Panofsky by interpreting the historical context, this time by respecting the respective emotional (Herding) and socio-historical (Greenblatt) premises.

Artistic artefacts as materializations of feelings

Against this background, it is appropriate to ask what are concretely the differences between Panofsky and the thinking of the New Historicism and that of Warburg and Cassirer. To this end, it is in coherence with general research to emphasize that Warburg shall be introduced as "the" researcher, who bases his concept of culture on psychological concepts of affect. As already mentioned, Warburg thinks that human encounters with the world are dominated by feelings, especially "phobic reflexes". But, as Warburg says, humans have the ability to distance themselves from them through symbolic and ritual processes. The concept of Cassirer agrees with that of Warburg, but it is less marked by fear than by vivid experiences that overwhelm man.

Respectively to this fundamental conviction both are sharing, Warburg tries to prove his assumption by comparing renaissance works of arts and literature with antique examples. Thus, already in his thesis about the renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli of 1893 Warburg writes:

> [...] that the artists and consultants in the 15th century considered the antique as a role model for increased physical movements and followed the antique examples when it concerned the display of external moving accessories – dresses and hairs.[25]

23 Greenblatt 1993, see 9–33.

24 With this research concern Herding initiated a graduate program between 1996–2004 at the university of Frankfurt with the focus on psychological energies of the arts: http://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/271237 (07.01.2019). See as well Keazor 2002.

25 Warburg 1893, 5: "[…] die Künstler und deren Berater in 'der Antike' ein gesteigerte äußere Bewegung verlangendes Vorbild sahen und sich an antike Vorbilder anlehnten, wenn es sich um die Darstellung äußerlich bewegten Beiwerks – der Gewandung und der Haare – handelte." (Translation MS).

Although Warburg's first studies have been dominated by psychological ideas of the so-called theory of "empathy" (in German: *Einfühlungstheorie*)[26] as Friedrich Theodor Vischer had invented in 1866,[27] he modified his focus later. This becomes obvious when Warburg changed the title of his next book project. In 1901 he no longer spoke of a "monistic psychology of art" (in German: *monistische Kunstpsychologie*) but of writing a book about "pragmatic instructions" (in German: *Ausdruckskunde*).[28] This means, the art should not be understood as a monistic unity of the beautiful, the true and the good, but as an expression of feelings and thus no longer anchored in the tradition of higher ideas but of cultural conditions.[29] Therefore, he started to collect pictures of artistic artefacts by which he could prove his assumption. With this collection, the atlas of images (in German: *Bilderatlas*), Warburg tries to show, that iconic gestures and symbolic structures the so-called *Pathosformeln* (in English: pathos formulae) of the lively arousals of humans exist always. They are part of the collective memory of man. Thus, the atlas or *Mnemosyne Project* shall show, Warburg insists, the cultural-geographical and historical topography and migration of images, which includes orient as well as occident.[30] In addition to the atlas, Warburg founded his own library (K.B.W.) and an institute which shall allow a fruitful exchange between different researchers by lectures and the edition of publications. Since 1921, Cassirer became acquainted with these institutions and became part of them by frequently using the library and regularly submitting purchase proposals for books, participating in the events of the institutes, giving several lectures and publishing them accordingly.[31] Finally, Warburg understands the formulae of pathos, as the cultural scientist Harmut Böhme pointed out, as "interferences of pictures and figures between affective energies and cultural models of realisation."[32] Thus, culture bases on effects driven by anxiety which dominate man or can be handled rationally.[33] Primary means of controlling them are images, Warburg says. They can be understood

26 See ibid.

27 Vischer 1888, 66–88.

28 For this see Warburg's notes in his diary in: Warburg 1901, quoted after Pfisterer – Hönes 2015, 4–5, and the introduction IX–XII.

29 See with respect to this fundamental change already the conflict in the 19th century between speculative aesthetics and formal aesthetics: Sauer (forthcoming).

30 Böhme 1997, 7, see furthermore 28–35.

31 Capeillères 2008, 77–86.

32 Böhme 1997, 10, "Pathos formulae" are "(zu) Bildern und Figuren geronnene Interferenzen zwischen Affektenergien und kulturellen Verarbeitungsmustern" (Translation MS), see furthermore 17–22.

33 Ibid. 11; 19.

> [...] as forms of distancing as well as forms of expressions of the lively arousals. They are allowing thinking without abstraction, reflections without reflexively banning, mimesis without mimicry, significance without loss of contact to the designated.[34]

Respectively to these effects of images, Warburg says once: "You are living but you do not hurt me."[35] Thus, displaying images can be considered as an archive "of historical psychology of human expressions" as well as a "room of symbolic displays" or "a room of distancing".[36]

But how, it is to ask further, is it possible to recognize the iconic formula and lively arousals or the pathos formula in pictures? How is it possible to grasp the gestures which survive as genetic materials, the so-called engrams?[37] A potential starting point to answer these questions, can be recognized in cultural habits, in which forms of "figure and order" occur, as Warburg mentioned. In tangible terms, it is the stunning presence of arousals which initially inscribe into the body and will be remembered as lively motions which take form in rituals. These common forms can be grasped and realized by artists. Nevertheless, for Warburg it is obvious, that the artists do not count only on the language of religion but develop their own forms through analyzing the pathetic forms of their own anxieties (in German: *Prägewerk*). However, the way of displaying, the style of forms the artists find are individual.[38] Through this, depending on time and culture the artists creations change due to their need of expression and orientation.[39]

Consulting Cassirer, the nearness of both, Warburg and Cassirer, is obvious. After his first personal contact 1924 with Warburg, Cassirer saw himself connected to Warburg not only ideally but in deep friendship.[40]

The process of distancing the world, as Cassirer describes it parallel to Warburg, is a process of suffering that overwhelms people, rather than allowing them to consciously grasp it.[41] Thus, the expression man finds has already a first sense. Respectively, the security and verity of the perception of expression (in German:

34 Ibid. 20: "[…] distanzschaffende Form und ausdrucksverleihende Gebärde, denkermöglichend ohne Abstraktion, reflexiv ohne reflexhaften Bann, mimetisch ohne mimikryhaften Mitvollzug, signifikativ ohne Kontaktverlust zum Bezeichneten." (Translation MS).

35 Warburg quoted after Pfisterer – Hönes 2015, 5: "Du lebst und tust mir nichts" (Translation MS), see as well Fehrenbach 2010, 132–136.

36 Warburg 1923, 59: "Denkraum der Besonnenheit" (Translation MS), see as well Böhme 1997, 11–14, here 14.

37 Böhme 1997, 9–30.

38 See the letter of Warburg from October 16th, 1895, quoted after Pfisterer – Hönes 2015, 144.

39 Böhme 1997, 32–33, see Zumbusch 2004, 129–149 and Schade 2011, 143–155.

40 See letter from June 11th, 1926, in: Raio 2008, No. 4.

41 Cassirer 1929, 88.

Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung) is beyond any mythological, rational or esthetic interpretations; it is the common base these forms come from and belong to.[42]

In the arts, Cassirer notes, and this is important, the initial process of the perception of expression, becomes obvious for man.[43] Thus he writes in his late book *An Essay on Man* in 1944:

> If we go through our passions, we will feel them in their whole power and highest tensions, but if we are crossing the threshold to the arts we will leave behind us the lasting pressure, the obsession of our inner impulses. The tragic poet is not a slave of his feelings but he controls them; and he is able to transfer this control onto the audience.[44]

Cassirer gives an example to demonstrate this effect by describing the feelings of a spectator when looking at a landscape painting. Instead of grasping living things he gets involved with living forms, Cassirer says:

> No longer in the direct contact with things I move according to the rhythm of spatial forms, according to the harmony and contrasts of colors, according to the balance of light and shadow. The entering into the dynamic of forms causes the aesthetic experience.[45]

Consequences: From Iconology to Image Science

If it is true, as Warburg and Cassirer postulate, that the perception of world is not neutral but based on feelings and that it is possible for humans to transform these feelings into images which can be felt by the audience, these findings will alter the

42 Ibid. 53–121, here 95: "Ihre Sicherheit und ihre Wahrheit [der Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung] ist sozusagen eine noch vor-mythische, vor-logische und vor-ästhetische; bildet sie doch den gemeinsamen Boden, dem alle jene Gestaltungen in irgendeiner Weise entsprossen sind und dem sie verhaftet bleiben."

43 Cassirer 1944, 86–107, see 99.

44 Ibid. 228: "Wir durchleben unsere Leidenschaften, empfinden sie in ihrer ganzen Wucht und ihrer höchsten Spannung, aber hinter uns lassen wir, wenn wir die Schwelle der Kunst überschreiten, den lastenden Druck, das Zwanghafte unserer inneren Regungen. Der tragische Dichter ist nicht Sklave, sondern Herr seiner Gefühle; und er ist in der Lage, diese Beherrschung auf die Zuschauer zu übertragen." (Translation MS).

45 Ibid. 233: "[…] das Feld nicht der lebendigen Dinge, sondern der 'lebendigen Formen'. Nicht mehr in der unmittelbaren Wirklichkeit der Dinge stehend, bewege ich mich nun im Rhythmus der räumlichen Formen, in der Harmonie und im Kontrast der Farben, im Gleichgewicht von Licht und Schatten. Der Eintritt in die Dynamik der Form begründet das ästhetische Erlebnis." (Translation MS).

understanding of the function of the arts. Respectively to that conclusion the understanding of the work of art as rather historical documents or in contrast aesthetic objects have to be supplemented. That is important, because if it is true that not only facts but underlying feelings of the images themselves belong to the understanding of the arts – with Panofsky's words a factual, intellectual fact and an actual expressive fact (in German: *ein Sach-Sinn und ein Ausdrucks-Sinn*) – then the interpretation of the subjects and the meaning of the images are changing profoundly. That what we see is no longer to be conceived only as a view of something or someone who is for example – with Panofsky – friendly or hostile but an answer of someone to his experiences with the world, that means his opinion about something or rather the opinion of an artist or client on it. In conclusion that means: With images it is possible to communicate. In this respect, each work of art has its relevance for life. It shows us an image of the world of someone else that can change our own view of it by challenging us to answer be it affirmative or negative.

The consequences of these findings, which Warburg and Cassirer initiated, open the door to the transformation from Iconology to Image Science. Analyzing the expressive meaning – and thus the effects of forms that were not addressed by either Panofsky nor the New Historicism but Warburg and Cassirer – with adequate methods, this will be the task for future research I pursue.[46]

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